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AUTHOR Wolfram, Walt
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INSTITUTION Center for Applied Linguistics, Washington, D.C. Sociolinguistics Program.
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ABSTRACT

This paper, which deals chiefly with Black English (BE), is an attempt "to exemplify some general principles concerning the nature of nonstandard dialects" with the chief goal of demonstrating the legitimacy of such dialects and fostering an attitude of respect towards them. The following points are stressed: (1) BE shares many features with other varieties of English, but is distinct in having a number of pronunciation and grammatical features peculiar to itself. (2) There are intra-dialectal variations among speakers of BE which correlate with social class, age, and degree of racial isolation. (3) Although BE is spoken almost exclusively by Negroes, not all Negroes speak BE, nor do BE speakers use exclusively nonstandard forms; there is a degree of fluctuation between BE and more standard-like forms. (4) BE is a fully formed system in its own right, with its own pronunciation and grammar rules, and is not simply an unworthy approximation of standard English. (5) The distinctiveness of BE can be traced to such factors as the influence of creole languages spoken by early plantation slaves, as well as to the social isolation of the Black community. (FWB)

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Walt Wolfram
Center for Applied Linguistics
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SOME ILLUSTRATIVE FEATURES OF BLACK ENGLISH

It would be extremely satisfying if, at the conclusion of this paper, I would be able to say that all the relevant aspects of the various nonstandard dialects within the United States had been described, particularly the English spoken by lower-class blacks. But it would also be quite presumptuous for me to think that such a task is achievable within the limits of this conference, if in fact such a goal is achievable. So rather than attempt to achieve an unrealistic goal by superficial overgeneralizations, I shall attempt to exemplify some general principles concerning the nature of nonstandard dialects: illustrations which are based on extensive research in this area over the past several years. The majority of these examples will be taken from what has been variously labeled "Black English", "Negro Nonstandard English", and "Negro Dialect". All of these terms have the same referential meaning, but since there is no established convention for denoting this dialect, we shall simply adopt the term Black English and consistently use it throughout this paper.[1]

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1. That there is no established term used to denote this dialect is a reflection of the fact that the legitimacy of the dialect has only been recognized in the last several years.

In discussing the features of this dialect, it is necessary to clarify several facts. In the first place, we recognize that this dialect shares many features with other kinds of English. However, we shall see that Black English is distinct because it has a number of pronunciation and grammatical features which are not shared with other dialects.

It is also important to note that not all Negroes speak Black English, just as not all persons of Spanish extraction speak with a Spanish accent. There is no genetic basis whatsoever for the distinctiveness of this dialect; it is a cultural behavior pattern which is simply transmitted by tradition, as are all cultural patterns. There are some Negroes whose speech is indistinguishable from others of the same region and social class and there are many more whose speech can be identified as black only by a few slight differences in pronunciation and vocal quality. It is called Black English, however, because very few people speak it who are not Negroes.

Furthermore, when we describe the features of this dialect, it should be kept in mind that almost all of the features associated with the dialect fluctuate with Standard English forms in actual speech. This variation must be kept in mind if one does not want to arrive at a distorted picture of what the dialect is like.

Finally, as Orlando Taylor has pointed out in his paper, it is important to realize that Black English is a fully formed system in its own right, with its own pronunciation and grammar rules. It cannot simply be dismissed as an unworthy approximation of Standard English. In fact, we shall see that there are some grammatical distinctions in Black English which can be made more easily than in Standard English.

There are two possible reasons for the distinctiveness of Black English. In the first place, the linguistic history of Black English is partly independent of the history of the rest of American English. It has been postulated that several of the features are traceable to African languages via the Caribbean Creole languages.[2] If this is the case, then it is apparent why some of the dialects are distinct. Even if this is not the case, however, the persistent segregation patterns of our society are sufficient cause for this dialect to develop its own character. Dialects develop when speakers of a common language are separated from each other, either by geographical or social distance. The social distance between white and black Americans is a significant factor in the development and maintenance of distinct dialect features.

The Overlapping Structure of Black English

Having presented the claims basic to our discussion, let us illustrate these with examples from the dialects of English. To begin with, I have maintained that Black English shares many features with other dialects of American English, but it is not identical with them. In essence, I am reacting against claims that, on the one hand, insist that this dialect is a completely different language and, on the other hand, claims that it is identical with other Southern dialects of American English. Loflin makes the former claim when he states:

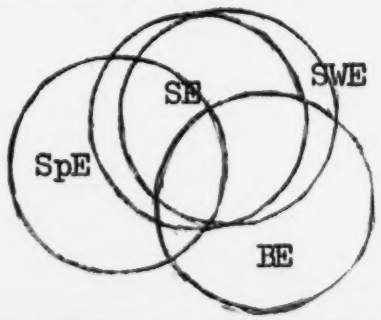
2. This position is stated most convincingly by William A. Stewart in "Sociolinguistic Factors in the History of American Negro Dialects", The Florida FL Reporter Vol. 5 (1967) and "Continuity and Change in American Negro Dialects", The Florida FL Reporter Vol. 6 (1968).

> Efforts to construct a grammar for Nonstandard Negro English suggest that the similarities between it and Standard English are superficial. There is every reason, at this stage of research to believe that a fuller description of Nonstandard Negro English will show a grammatical system which must be treated as a foreign language.[3]

Dialectologists like Kurath and McDavid have come closest to the position that this dialect is simply like other white southern dialects.[4] Kurath, one of the most influential American dialectologists states:

> By and large the Southern Negro speaks the language of the white man of his locality or area and of his education... As far as the speech of uneducated Negroes is concerned, it differs little from that of the illiterate white; that is, it exhibits the same regional and local variation as that of the simple white folk.[5]

Both of these pronouncements seem too strong in the face of our current evidence. Rather, we may view the dialect as an overlapping system with other dialects of English, including Standard English, white southern speech, and even some aspects of varieties which have been influenced by a foreign language, such as Spanish. We may illustrate this digrammatically as:



3. Marvin D. Loflin, "Teaching Problem in Nonstandard Negro English", English Journal Vol. 56 (1967), p. 1312.

4. See, for example, Hans Kurath, A Word Geography of the Eastern United States. Providence, American Council of Learned Societies (1949) or Raven McDavid, "American Social Dialects", College English, Vol. 26 (1965).

In the above diagram, SE= Standard English, BE= Black English, SWE= Southern White English, and SpE= Spanish-influenced English. We could, of course, include many other varieties of English, but these are sufficent for illustrative purposes. One will note that the extent of overlapping is not equal so that, for example, SWE overlaps with SE more than BE does. This observation is essential in understanding the different types of relations that exist between American English dialects.

There are a number of examples with which we could illustrate the overlap between Black English and other varieties of English, but probably the best known example we could choose is the case of negative sentences. In Standard English, an underlying negative can only be realized at one point in a sentence regardless of the structure of the sentence.[6] Thus, the Standard English speaker would say He didn't do anything, or He did nothing, but not He didn't do nothing. In the various dialects of English considered nonstandard, when there is an indefinite pronoun or article, the negative may be realized on indefinites as well as the auxiliary of the verb. This means that the nonstandard speaker may say He didn't do nothing. This type of negative is not limited to two realizations as the term "double negative" might seem to imply. In actuality, negatives may occur on as many indefinites as there are in the sentence; hence, a sentence like He didn't know anything about anybody having any knife of anything can be realized as He didn't know nothing about nobody having no knife or nothing. This type of "multiple negation" is characteristic of all types of nonstandard English dialects, including northern and southern white, Spanish-influenced, and Black English. In the case of Spanish-influenced English, the negative structure may have a different source

6. This is not a completely accurate statement, but for the sake of this discussion the isolated conditions under which multiple negation may occur in Standard English are irrelevant.

inasmuch as it may result from the fact that multiple negation is the regular pattern in Spanish. That is, a Spanish sentence such as No hizo nada may be cited as an important source for the use of multiple negatives in a sentence such as He no did nothing. It should also be pointed out that the most common source for the acquisition of English by Spanish-speaking immigrants from Mexico, Cuba, or Puerto Rica would be the nonstandard speaking community. In the case of Puerto Ricans in Harlem, this may be the black community, so that many features of Black English can occur in their speech. In other sections of the United States, this may be the lower-class white community, so that these communities adopt speech more like the white nonstandard speaking community.

Although we observe similarities between various dialects of English considered nonstandard in their formation of negatives, we must not assume that these nonstandard dialects are completely identical. For example, we observe some nonstandard dialects which use a negativized auxiliary before a negative indefinite in declarative sentences. The construction Didn't nobody do it in these dialects is roughly equivalent to the Standard English sentence Nobody did it. This type of construction would be used by Black English and Southern White nonstandard speakers, but not by northern varieties of nonstandard white speech. We thus see that Black English is closer to southern than northern nonstandard dialects.

But we also cannot assume that Black English is completely identical with some varieties of white southern speech. One feature which may be limited to Black English is the negation of an indefinite form which precedes the verb as well as an auxiliary to the verb. This means that Nobody don't like it may be equivalent to the Standard English sentence

Nobody likes it. This feature of negation which is found in Black English is quite limited, if it exists at all, in other nonstandard dialects of English.[7]

One feature which seems to be completely restricted to Black English is the use of multiple negation across two clauses within a sentence. In accordance with this rule, a sentence such as It wasn't no man couldn't do it may mean that no man could do it. Attestation of this type of negation across clauses is lacking in studies of white nonstandard dialects in both the North and South.

What we observe, then, in the dialectal distribution of negation is a clear-cut example of overlapping systems of English, with similarities and differences between dialects. To assume anything different is to ignore the empirical facts about the structure of English dialects.

The Distribution of Black English in the Black Community

We have also observed, at the outset of this discussion, that not all Negroes speak Black English. Rather, its usage varies along several dimensions in the black community. For one, it varies with respect to social class. Middle-class black speakers do not typically have multiple negation, "habitual" be in a sentence such as He usually be at work, and the absence of third person, singular -s in a sentence such as He know my friend as an integral part of their grammatical system. These features are used quite consistently by many working-class blacks. On the level of pronunciation, the pluralization of items

7. There is an interesting misunderstanding of the T.V. commerical for Sara Lee cakes which may arise do to the use of this type of negation. The commerical states "Everybody doesn't like something, but nobody doesn't like Sara Lee." For Standard English and most white nonstandard dialect speakers, this means that everybody likes Sara Lee Cakes because there is anyone who doesn't like them. But for the Black English speaker, it may mean that nobody likes Sara Lee cakes--a rather curious way of advertising a product to the lower-class black community. I am indebted to my colleague Ralph Fasold for first calling my attention to this advertisement.

like desk and test as desses and tesses, and the pronunciation of items like both and breath as bof and breaf is a characteristic of working-class black speech.

Although social class is the single most important social factor correlating with speech differences in the black community, there are other social variables which intersect with class in an important way. For example, within the different social classes of Negroes, it is observed that females generally approximate the Standard English norm more than males do. This observation is consonant with the observation that the Negro male departs more from the mainstream norm of middle-class behavior than the female.

Age also correlates with differences in speech behavior. Adults generally use socially stigmatized features less than teenagers and preadolescents. In fact, it appears that children rather than adults are the main purveyors of the language system. In terms of some of the ritualistic uses of language in the black community, it is also observed that it is teenagers (particularly males) who are mainly responsible for carrying on the tradition of ritualistic language. Language rituals such as "sounding" (the ritualistic game in which a mother is insulted), "signifying" (the ritualistic game of insulting another person directly), and "rapping" (a fluent and lively way of talking characterized by a high degree of personal style) show definite patterns of age-grading.

Racial isolation is another factor which intersects with social class to account for speech differences in the black community. It is of particular importance with relation to language acquisition. A black child who has predominantly white peers will speak like his peers not his parents. (Of course the converse is also true; white children

with predominantly black peers will speak like their peers).

The Fluctuation of Features

We have maintained that if we are to get a realistic assessment of how Black English operates as an example of a nonstandard dialect, we must recognize that there is considerable fluctuation between the forms peculiar to the dialect and more standard-like forms. That is, Black English speakers do not exclusively use nonstandard forms. This type of fluctuation is to be expected when a subordinate social group is exposed to the more prestigous language system of the superordinate social class.

This type of fluctuation can be readily illustrated by observing how copula absence patterns in Black English. This type of absence refers to the absence of *is* or *are* in sentences such as *He busy* or *He not in now*. We find that Black English speakers fluctuate between a sentence like *He's busy* and *He busy*. This fluctuation is not random or haphazard, however. On the one hand, the fluctuation may correlate with some of the social characteristics described above, including status, age, sex, language style, and racial isolation. Thus a young male who has exclusively black lower-class contacts would be expected to use *He busy* considerably more frequently than an older female subject whose social contacts put her in touch with more middle-class goals and aspirations.

It is also important to recognize that some of this fluctuation must be traced to certain linguistic factors, such as the linguistic context in which the item might occur or the structural composition of the construction. Independent linguistic variables may not only affect the variability of items, they may also have important implications about the social consequences of items. Take again the

case of multiple negation. The tabulations of multiple negation reveal that one type of multiple negative involving a negativized auxiliary and a negative adverb (e.g. hardly never) is observed among the middle class population while "triple" negatives such as He didn't do nothing to nobody are not found at all in the speech of most middle-class informants. Similarly, copula absence involving is (e.g. He nice) is confined to the working class, but the absence of are, particularly with gonna (e.g. They gonna go now), is sometimes found in the speech of both middle and lower-class blacks.

With respect to pronunciation features, we observe that they can be greatly affected by the context of the surrounding sounds. For example, we notice that consonant clusters at the end of a word, such as st, ld, and nd often realize only the first member of this cluster, s, l, or n in Black English. Thus, tes', wil', and win' are appropriate pronunciations for standard English test, wild, and wind. In Standard English, this type of cluster "simplification" is appropriate only when the following word begins with a consonant (e.g. tes'case, wil' tiger, and win'breaker), but in Black English it is appropriate when the following word begins with either a consonant or a vowel. Although the Black English pronunciation pattern allows for simplification in both types of contexts, simplification is greatly favored when the following word begins with a consonant. For some working class speakers, simplification takes place 95-100% when followed by a consonant but only 40-60% when followed by a vowel.

Black English as a Unique System

Although we have suggested above that there is fluctuation between Standard English and Black English forms by lower-class blacks, this in no way implies that Black English can simply be considered an unworthy

approximation of Standard English. Rather, we must insist that it is a cohesive system in its own right, with its own pronunciation and grammatical patterns. If one only views this dialect in terms of a norm, he is not only philosphically wrong, but he may miss important structural facts about the nature of this dialect. For example, consider the following interpretation of the finite form of the verb be, a commonly cited feature of Black English. Ruth Golden, who views Black English in terms of a descending scale of deviation from standard English, states:

> Individuals use different levels of language for different situations. These levels vary from the illiterate to the formal and literary. For instance, starting with the illiterate, He don't be here, we might progress to the colloquial, He ain't here, to the general and informal He isn't here up to the formal and literary, He is not present.[8]

If one views be as an unworthy approximation of Standard English the possibility that it may have a grammatical function quite different from Standard English is precluded. Instead, it is only considered as a "substitution" for the finite forms of the verb in Standard English, is, am, and are. When considering this feature, however, we must look at the use of be descriptively. That is, we must put aside the social consequences of a particular form and ask how it functions in the dialect in question. When such an approach is taken, we find that the form be may represent a grammatical category which seems to be unique to Black English. In a sentence such as Sometime he be playing and sometime he don't we find that be refers to an activity which is repeated

8. Ruth I. Golden, Effectiveness of Instructional Tapes for Changing Regional Tapes. Ed. D. Dissertation, Wayne State University (1963), p. 171.

at various intervals ("habitual" be). It would be inappropriate (i.e. ungrammatical within the dialect itself) to use it where a momentary activity is indicated; thus it would not be used in a sentence such as He's playing right now or He playing right now.

Similarly, the use of done as an auxiliary in a construction as He done gave up is not simply an inept attempt to approximate Standard English by Black English and white southern speakers. Rather, it indicates a completed or emphatic action which contrasts with the sentence He gave up. When we recognize this system as a cohesive and highly complex dialect, as any language or dialect is, we find out that there are subtle but important grammatical distinctions which are an inherent part of the dialect and unequal to any grammatical construction we might have in Standard English.

The Historical Reasons for Black English

Finally, we come to the reasons for the distinctness of this dialect. We have suggested that this is in part due to the influence from a Caribbean Creole language, which may have been spoken by the early plantation slaves. If this is indeed the case, then we would expect that some of the features of this dialect may be traced to the Caribbean Creoles or to Gullah, the creole-based language spoken by some Negroes along the coastal region of South Carolina and Georgia. One of the features which seems most likely to be related to Gullah is the use of been as an auxiliary marking remote time. Thus, when I asked one of my informants if he knew an acquaintance of mine, he replied, "I béen known him". This informed me in no uncertain terms that he had known him for some time now. Thus use of been cannot simply be related to the absence of the

auxiliary have since I have been known him cannot be traced to a development in Standard English by which have simply was deleted. Rather, it is more reasonable to attribute its usage to its widespread use as a tense marker in Gullah.

There are other features about which the historical origin is not nearly as clear. For example, some linguists think that the absence of third person singular -s forms, as in the sentence He act like a big dude can be traced to a similar type of phenomenon characterising some Caribbean Creole languages. Other linguists, primarily dialect geographers, point out that there are parts of the southern United States where this feature characterizes whites, and that it can be related to a dialect area which originated in southern England (Of course, one cannot dismiss the fact that there are some features which southern whites may have acquired from blacks). On this point, all evidence must be weighed carefully in relation to how the feature is structured within the dialect before a definitive conclusion can be reached about the origin of a feature.

And then there are features which can be traced to the retention of older English forms: forms which have been retained because of the geographical and social isolation of certain segments of the community. In this sense, some aspects of the dialect of lower-class black citizens can be seen to parallel some of the patterns which can be observed in lower socio-economic class white community in the Appalachian region of the South. In both cases, regional and social isolation has resulted in the retention of some older English forms. Thus, for example, we find that the pronunciation of ask and ax is common in Black English as well as Appalachian white speech. An investigation of the history of the English language gives an account-

able reason for such usage; it was the commonly used form several centuries ago. We thus see how the social patterns of our society must also be considered to give an accurate picture of the development of nonstandard dialects.

Conclusion

I could undoubtedly extend the description of the features of this dialect to a much more comprehensive level.[9] But even after a much more exhaustive description, we would have to admit that there were still many areas which had not been covered. All languages are highly complex and developed systems, and cannot be cavalierly dismissed with superficial statements about their structure. Hopefully, the illustrations I have given here will result in a wider recognition of this fact. For, in actuality, it is the attitude of respect and legitimacy for the various dialects of English that these examples are trying to demonstrate. If these selected features of Black English can help communicate this idea then I will have been successful--much more successful than if had given a technically impeccable description of all the features of the dialect. It is attitudes that form the basis for respect, not facts.

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9. For a more complete but nontechnical inventory of the features of Black English, see Ralph W. Fasold and Walt Wolfram "Some Linguistic Features of Negro Dialect", in Ralph W. Fasold and Roger W. Shuy (eds.), Teaching Standard English in the Inner City. Washington, D.C., Center for Applied Linguistics (1970).